

Kamma & Rebirth



There is, at present, no proof of life after death. If the concept of rebirth, life that follows death, is a myth, then what reason would we have for not simply devoting our lives to the present life we now have?

Regardless of how much we may enjoy the pleasant aspects of our present life, there is one thing that is inescapable, and this is suffering, displeasure, disappointment, sickness, death and hardship. What can we do now, in this present life, to make our lives happier and easier to live from day-to-day?

Science has begun examining the elements of consciousness. Surprisingly, the overall agreement is the possibility that consciousness is not a product of the synaptic activity of the brain. As researcher Sam Parnia¹ writes:

"Recently some researchers have started to raise the question that maybe your mind, your consciousness, your psyche, the thing that makes

you, may not be produced by the brain. The brain might be acting more like an intermediary.

I do agree that this raises the possibility that the entity we call the mind or consciousness may not be produced by the brain. It's certainly possible that maybe there's another layer of reality that we haven't yet discovered that's essentially beyond what we know of the brain, and which determines our reality.

So, I believe it is possible for consciousness to be an as of yet undiscovered scientific entity that may not necessarily be produced by synaptic activity in the brain."

Further mention of Dr. Parnia's research was reported by the Kennedy Institute of Bioethics Research at Georgetown University²:

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¹ Sam Parnia "What Can Science Tell Us About Death?" <https://www.nyas.org/news-articles/academy-news/is-there-life-after-death/>

² Parnia, Georgetown University: <https://bioethics.georgetown.edu/2015/07/consciousness-after-clinical-death-the-biggest-ever-scientific-study-published/>

“Dr. Parnia, in the interview, stated: “The evidence thus far suggests that in the first few minutes after death, consciousness is not annihilated. Whether it fades away afterward, we do not know, but right after death, consciousness is not lost. We know the brain can’t function when the heart has stopped beating. But in this case conscious awareness appears to have continued for up to three minutes into the period when the heart wasn’t beating, even though the brain typically shuts down within 20-30 seconds after the heart has stopped. This is significant, since it has often been assumed that experiences in relation to death are likely hallucinations or illusions, occurring either before the heart stops or after the heart has been successfully restarted. but not an experience corresponding with ‘real’ events when the heart isn’t beating. Furthermore, the detailed recollections of visual awareness, in this case, were consistent with verified events”.

Consider the implications of this study in relation to what the Buddha taught about rebirth: Our stream of consciousness, which we spend a lifetime building, does not merely poof-out-of-existence when the body dies.

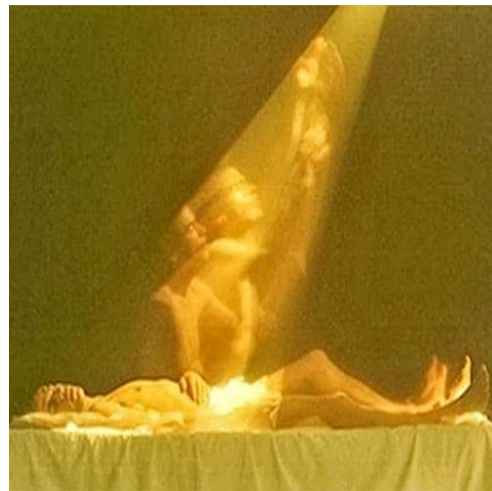
As is suggested by this research, our consciousness is measurable in the material world for a few minutes after the body dies. If this research is correct, then taking the next logical step to include the Buddha’s teaching of rebirth, might not be such a stretch of the imagination.

While science has not yet provided indisputable proof, what if the Buddha is right? What if the consciousness survives the death of the body and transfers to a new life at the moment an embryo becomes fertilized?

Let’s say it is true, we might want to consider the concept that living a better life now insures us a better life-experience in the next rebirth. What do we have to lose?

Are human beings nothing more than matter; cells and atoms? Is there nothing more to human life than the material aspect? Is consciousness simply a by-product of this material existence? The aforementioned research implies otherwise.

What is the point of human consciousness; of happiness, joy, love and suffering if we are nothing more than a bag of bones and all of our learned experiences die when the body dies, leaving nothing as a result? Answers to such questions are required in order to come to an understanding about the purpose of human life.



According to the religious world-view, human beings get one physical life on Earth.

Depending on which beliefs are held, and one’s adherence to the doctrine and dogma of those beliefs, is the determinant for an existence either in hell or in heaven. The religious world-view offers no teaching with regard to the fate of a human being’s stream of consciousness, one can only imagine existence in such realms as a heaven, hell or stuck somewhere in between.

However, what if you were given the explanation that your present life is only a single life in a very long chain of lives, spanning many eons of time? This explanation infers that rebirth into a new human life is at least comprehensible. You know what human life is; you are familiar with living a human life in the material world.

Unlike the religious world-view of life and death and the material point of view, where humans are nothing more than a pile of biologically organized molecules that come to nothing after death, you can envisage never-ending life as a human being with a connected stream of consciousness.

REBIRTH: Punabbhava (poon-ah-bah-vah)³



The alternate concept to the religious world-view offered by the Buddha is known as rebirth, and is called punabbhava in the original Pali texts. Specific words were carefully used by the Buddha when he taught. This Pali word refers to the rebirth process and literally means “again existence.” This word is concatenated from two Pali words. The first is *puna*⁵ meaning ‘again’ or ‘re-existence.’ The second is *bhava*⁶, which has several meanings depending on context, but is

generally translated as rebirth, becoming or existence.

Buddha taught that there is a continuity of a human’s stream of consciousness that, after death, links to another life, until this link is broken by full enlightenment (nibbana); a blowing out of the kamma that links one human existence to another, human beings will continue to be reborn.

This rebirth teaching does not infer that the link between one human life and the next is anything like the concept of a human soul, which is taught in most world-view religions, including Hinduism.

Consciousness links are developed and maintained by one’s own actions from lifetime to lifetime. These actions are known as kamma in Pali and karma in Sanskrit. How, you might ask, is this consciousness link possible? More importantly is it credible?

According to the popular world-view, an entity known as the soul, functions as the transmitter of human individuality. But, the Buddha taught that neither the self or the soul exists⁷. How can this be?

The Buddha provided a more credible concept of being human by teaching that our identity; our individuality, is a composite of our kamma, which are made of our own actions, our own behavior, past and present, and maintained by our stream of consciousness. However, this stream of consciousness in no manner of speaking refers to or implies the existence of a soul.

³ Punabbhava: *Pali* https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=bhava&searchhws=yes

⁴ Again existence *Pali* https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=bhava&searchhws=yes

⁵ Puna *Pali* <http://dictionary.tamilc-re-existence-ube.com/pali-dictionary.aspx> : re-existence

⁶ Bhava *Pali* ““becoming,” (form of) rebirth, (state of) existence, a “life” *ibid*

⁷ Anatta: no self: Anatta-lakkhana Sutta: The Discourse on the Not-self
<https://accesstosight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.059.nymo.html>

How do our actions attach to our stream of consciousness, and how does this determine who or what we are? Well, human beings basically live their lives within the confines of two basic forms. There is the experience of life in the material sense, within and around an environment of material energy. We also exist in a stream of mental energy or consciousness through the five senses.

All of this existence is influenced by both of these forms of energy. These influences however, are all impermanent, rising and falling, like ocean tides. Both conscious energy and material energy come and go, fading away and being replaced by new and different forms.

Whether we experience different forms of conscious awareness or different forms of material things in our lives, nothing is permanent nor exists of its own accord, but is dependent on many, many elements. Even the human body is a mass of organized, energized matter, that becomes visible materially. However, none of the materiality we experience with our bodies is permanent.

Citta (chee-tah)⁸

This may seem like a very simple explanation for the material world, but what of the existence of one's mental consciousness, which is certainly not something material that we can experience through the senses, such as touch, sight, sound, or taste. Why then does it seem like we have a self, and identity separate from one another? Doesn't the experience of me, my or I, prove that the self exists? After all, it sure seems like we have a personality that we identify as "me" or "I."



Recall, if you will, the earlier mention of the Buddha's teaching about kamma, that kamma is determined by our own actions. These actions include our mental actions; conscious actions that sets in place what it is that we choose to believe.

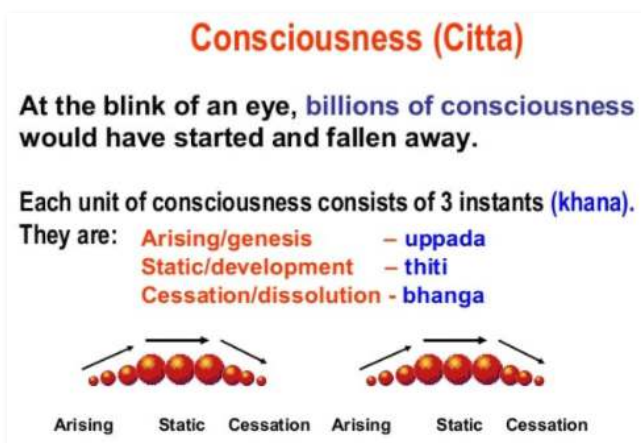
Also, our physical actions, which are more often than not determined by our mental actions, which, again, we base on our beliefs, opinions, and habits. We base our mental actions on what we deem as good or bad, sweet or sour, hot or cold, this or that, which is further based on those things that we find pleasant or unpleasant. Again, the Buddha employed a specific word to describe and define these mental actions.

Our thinking and mental actions; the decisions we make based on our thinking, play a major role in supporting the idea that there is a self. These mental "thought moments" are called *citta* in the Pali language.

However, the operation of the *citta* is extremely fleeting. Whenever a mental thought arises, which is the root of our decision-making, the *citta* only exists for an extremely brief moment while experiencing

⁸ *Citta Pali* "the centre & focus of man's emotional nature as well as that intellectual element which inheres in & accompanies its manifestations; i. e. thought. | https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=citta&searchhws=yes | <http://dictionary.tamilcube.com/pali-dictionary.aspx>

the object of our thought. Immediately, the citta dissolves and is gone, leaving no trace of itself behind. Once a citta is gone it is immediately replaced by another citta; another brief thought process. This goes on as long as we are awake and focused on the object of our thinking⁹.



Stream of Consciousness

This short span of citta (thought) existence does not mean that it leaves no impression on the stream of consciousness, rather they add to the continuity of our thinking. Over and over again, for our entire lifetime; countless lifetimes, these cittas arise and dissolve. These tiny mental processes do not affect who we are. In other words, there is no ego connection to these cittas. Any continuity that a citta has might be seen in our habitual patterns of behavior, which is where the cittas (thoughts) are created. The arising and passing away of cittas are further proof that no self can be found.

However, the continuity of cittas (thoughts) that are repetitive, leading us to believe in some continued identity as a self, but there is

really no self underneath it all, providing us with some solid foundation of self-ness.

Our bodies respond to the decisions we make, thus providing a continuum of successive cittas (thoughts). Our stream of consciousness provides the physical basis for an endless succession of cittas (thoughts). The physical body is therefore the foundation for the succession of cittas (thoughts) via the senses.

However, once the death of the physical organism is complete there is no longer a means or foundation of support for consciousness, and therefore can no longer provide a pathway for cittas (thoughts) to arise. Cittas are the mind-body link, which causes us to mistakenly think in terms of a separate self.

Consciousness at Death

At the very moment of death, the person's stream of consciousness experiences one final conscious thought, and this is known as death consciousness¹⁰. This last conscious thought takes place very rapidly.



In light of the aforementioned recent scientific research, stating that a three-minute window of consciousness exists after death of the body, provides some credence of this aspect of the Buddha's teachings of death consciousness.

⁹ Arising of Cittas: <https://accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/mendis/wheel322.html#citta>

¹⁰ Death Consciousness: "The Mind at the Time of Death" | <https://accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/mendis/wheel322.html>

This is the final thought before the energy of the body is exhausted. This final thought is known as *cuti citta*¹¹. Therefore, this last *citta* (thought) constitutes and indicates the complete end of the person's present life.

However, following this last *citta*, another *citta* arises, indicating the activation of a new physical organism with another active stream of consciousness. The basis for this newly activated stream of consciousness is, of course, a fertilized ovum.



Now, this new stream of consciousness remains active from the first *citta* to the last *citta* or death consciousness. Although this process may seem to support the concept of a soul, the new stream of consciousness does not contain the memories of the person who died.

Memory is a physiological function of the brain created through a complex series of stable neural connections that remain as long as the body is alive to support and nourish the brain¹². Once the energy of the body is completely depleted it can no longer maintain the neural connections, and so the memories die along with the neural connections in the brain.

Re-Linking a Stream of Consciousness

The old stream of consciousness does not simply disintegrate when the energy of the body is depleted and dies. The former stream of consciousness is activated by the first spark of *citta* (thoughts) in the newborn baby¹³. This initial spark of *citta*, the Buddha taught and as is recorded in the Abhidhamma Sangaha¹⁴, is known as the *patisandhi citta*¹⁵ (*pah-tee-sahn-dee chee-tah*), literally meaning "relinking consciousness." The *pa.tisandhi citta* is the act of consciousness which arises at the first moment of life, the moment of conception. It is determined by the last kammic *citta* of the preceding life¹⁶.

What remains intact from the last *citta* (death consciousness) to the new *citta* are the experiences. There is no transmission of memory. *Cittas* are like storage, transferring experiences from the last *citta* of the previous

¹¹ *Cuti Pali* "vanishing, passing away, decease, shifting out of existence" https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=cuti&searchhws=yes | *citta Pali* "thoughts"

¹² "Ensembles of neurons representing experience undergo activity-dependent plasticity and are important for learning and recall. They are thus considered cellular engrams of memory."

<https://journals.plos.org/plosbiology/article?id=10.1371/journal.pbio.3000928>

¹³ Brain before birth." <https://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/doi/full/10.1289/EHP2268> "The process that will ultimately give rise to the connectome (brain) begins about 25 days after conception, when the neural tube begins to form. By the end of the embryonic period (gestational week 10), the basics of the neural system are established. All the structures continue to develop throughout the fetal period and early childhood. By 6 years of age, the brain has reached 90% of its adult volume."

¹⁴ Abhidhamma Sangaha: (Abhidhamma Pitaka) <https://accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/abhi/index.html>

¹⁵ *patisandhi citta Pali* "Thoughts, entering the womb in a new existence, conception, re-birth: [पटिसन्धि] https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=pa%E1%B9%ADisandhi&searchhws=yes

¹⁶ Rebirth Consciousness - Abhidhamma Sangaha: <https://accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/mendis/wheel322.html>

life to the new citta of the next life. Therefore, what is actually transferred is the stored impressions. This process goes on for as long as a person remains subject to the various kmmas (karmas) they accumulate. Only when an individual has removed all subjectivity to kamma, will rebirth no longer take place.

What this means is that when a person is no longer subject to kamma, they are no longer ignorant of the truth about the nature of reality. Such a person becomes fully awakened to the point where they have a complete understanding of the Four Noble Truths and have lived their life in complete alignment with the Eightfold Noble Path.



Bhikkhu Bodhi, a Theravadin monk and prolific author, explains how the citta experiences (stream of consciousness) transfers from one lifetime to

another, using the symbol of a burning candle¹⁷.

Let's say you light a long-tapered candle. You leave the candle burning for several hours. The candle is made of wax with a central wick passing through the wax from top to bottom. The body of the candle is like the body of the human, and the wick provides a pathway through the body to support the energy of the flame. The wick passing through the candle is how the candle is able to support the energy of the flame.

Each moment that the candle burns, just as each moment that the body is alive and experiencing life, both consume fuel in order to function. Each moment the candle burns it consumes different air, and elements

necessary to function, the same as a human body. As long as there is fuel, a wick, and a flame, the candle will burn. Although it seems that the flame does not change, but continues burning, it is actually different each moment the candle burns.

Without the wax and the wick, the candle would not burn. Therefore, the flame is completely dependent on the wax and the wick, just like the stream of consciousness is dependent on the body to exist.

Cittas & the Burning Candle Metaphor



Eventually, the flame consumes the wax and the wick. The candle wax depletes, becoming short and close to the bottom, eventually burning itself out. There will be no more wax or wick to fuel the energy of the flame. The flame will become exhausted of the elements to keep it burning.

In order to sustain the light of the candle, you retrieve a new candle and place the wick of the new candle to the flame of the old candle. The energy of the flame is transferred to the new candle. The flame of the old candle goes out when it reaches the end of the fuel needed to keep it alight.

Now, a new candle is burning the wax and the wick. Is the flame of the old candle the same as the flame on the new candle? You could say that it is the same flame because there is a

¹⁷ Candle Allegory: "I have taken the liberty of paraphrasing his concepts for the purpose of providing ease of understanding."

continuity of flame from the old wick to the new wick. It certainly appears to be the same flame.

However, the energy of the flame is now supported by a new candle, which will continue to burn for a finite period of time until the flame exhausts the fuel of the new candle. The new flame, although being transferred from one candle body to another, exists on the fuel of the new candle body; new wax and a new wick. However, there is no particular identity of the new flame from the old flame.



The new flame continues to be a bit of fire, a small element of energy with the same properties as the old flame, but without any exact identity. The conditions that give rise to the existence of the new flame are the same as the old flame. Although the new flame is burning slightly different elements than that of the old flame, no condition between the flames are completely matching; completely indistinguishable.

However, we can say that the old flame is the same as the new flame because the new candle continues the succession of a flame from one candle to another.

This same process is also true of the stream of consciousness. The flame represents the stream of consciousness in a human being.

Although, the elements of consciousness that encompass or contain a person's life experiences change from lifetime to lifetime, the same stream of consciousness, like the flame of one candle to another, is a continuum.

Human Consciousness & How Rebirth Takes Place

Many of the Buddha's teachings stress that experience is everything. In order for a human being to experience consciousness, a human body, with sense faculties, must exist. Human beings have eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose, tongue, body, and brain (mental-citta-thought) consciousness.

The sense faculties are always changing depending on the experiences of the person. At the time of death, the current of energy a person has while they are alive, passes on to another body. The current of energy or stream of consciousness, is influenced by our experiences and actions (kamma). Thus, the transmission of life energy (stream of consciousness) from one life to another is never identical, but the sequence remains constant from lifetime to lifetime.

In order for the stream of consciousness to continue, three things must take place. The Buddha teaches that there must be conception, and in order for conception to take place, sperm must unite with an ovum when a woman is fertile. This transmits or transfers the energy of the sperm and ovum to a new human embryo. This is the second condition that must exist. The third, and most important condition that must exist is called

gandhabba¹⁸, which is the stream of consciousness from the deceased person.

While it is true that the new embryo carries the genes of the parents, the child that is born possesses a completely separate consciousness that was transferred from another human being's life, which precedes the new life of the child.

The Cause of Rebirth

Death alone does not cause rebirth. The Buddha taught that there are specific causes that lead to rebirth. When a new life arises, a transference of the characteristics of the stream of consciousness takes place. The characteristics of the stream of consciousness are set in place by the kammic (karmic) imprint of the previous life. Characteristics of kamma are impressions set into the stream of consciousness by a person's actions and the experiences of those actions). From embryo to death a person "becomes."

This process of "becoming" is known as *bhava*¹⁹ in the Pali language, and the word *bhava* has several meanings depending on the context in which it is used. This state of "becoming," called *bhava* means "becoming," which is a form of rebirth; a state of existence; a "life."

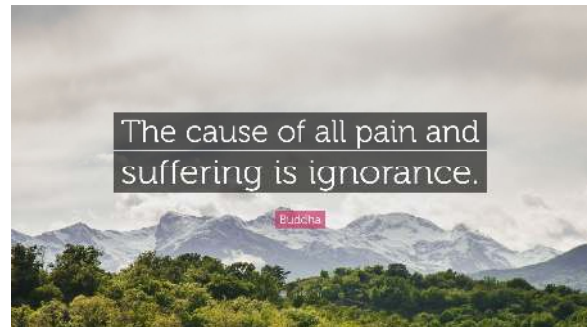


BECOMING

Becoming, in the context of the use of *bhava*, becoming a life; living; in the texts is dependent on many things.

A human being's stream of consciousness is dependent on many things that a person experiences throughout their life.

The most basic root of all becoming (whatever one becomes), is ignorance (*avijjā*²⁰). Ignorance in this context, does not mean stupidity, although stupidity can certainly be an element of ignorance.



Ignorance, in the context of the Buddha's teaching, encompasses not merely stupidity, but lack of knowledge. Because of a lack of knowledge, we cannot see the truth about the nature of reality.

¹⁸ Gandhabba: <http://dictionary.tamilcube.com/pali-dictionary.aspx> [गन्धर्व] a being ready to take a new existence

¹⁹ Bhava *Pali* "Becoming" https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=bhava&searchhws=yes | भव ; bhāva ; condition ; nature ; becoming. भव ; bhava ; the state of existence.

²⁰ Avijjā अविज्ञा ; avijjā ; https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=avijj%C4%81&searchhws=yes | ignorance. ignorance; the main root of evil and of continual rebirth.

Our thinking becomes distorted, but we don't realize it is distorted because we do not understand or see what is behind our perceptions, beliefs, and opinions (wrong views). Therefore, incorrect views, opinions and beliefs, reveal that our perception is distorted, sometimes even perverted (corrupted).

An example of this is when we perceive things, particularly from early childhood, we perceive the world around us to be permanent. We begin to develop a relationship with the world around us; other people, our families; our environments, and so on. From this we develop a belief in a self.

However, this belief or perception of a self, we base on input from our senses. We develop perceptions, beliefs, opinions, and so on, from pleasant and unpleasant experiences. From this "becoming" state, which evolves throughout our entire lives, we develop cravings; desires to experience pleasantness, and comforts, along with desire to avoid unpleasant experiences.

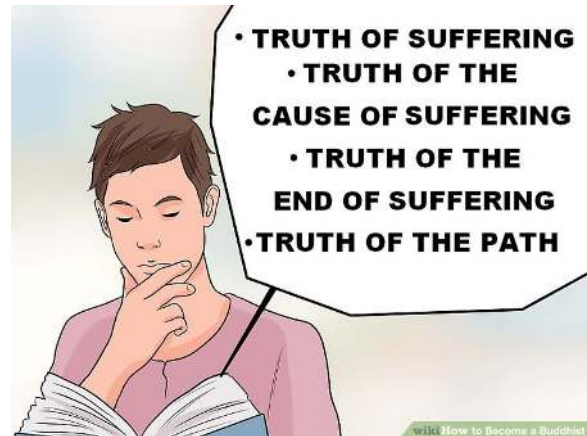
Cravings are always bathed in *tanha*²¹, regardless of whether the craving is for the pleasant or to avoid the unpleasant. Craving arises because it is aroused by our memories of various experiences that we accumulate through sensory contact.

At the time of death, when the *patisahndi citta*²² (the last death consciousness) has processed, the brain no longer produces thoughts, the consciousness separates from

the body. It is the craving for existence that causes the stream of consciousness to grasp hold of a new body. It is craving for becoming, to become, to exist, that causes the stream of consciousness to attach to a new life.

This process, the Buddha called *sibbana*²³, which means "sewing together," attaching one life to another life, like one would sew pieces of cloth together. So, the cycle of life and death (*samsara*) is fueled by craving. Craving is an element of becoming that ties one life; one stream of consciousness, to another.

Where does kamma fit into this cycle if it is craving to become, to exist, to be reborn, that causes rebirth? To be perfectly clear, kamma does not "cause" rebirth. Kamma determines the form that rebirth takes.



KAMMA (Karma)

Since the word kamma means 'action,' it is our actions throughout life; our reactions to the things we experience, that is responsible

²¹ *Tanha* Pali craving, hunger for, excitement, the fever of unsatisfied longing: https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=ta%E1%B9%87h%C4%81&searchhws=yes | तण्हा ; taṇhā ; craving ; thirst ; lust ; attachment.

²² *patisahndi citta* Pali *ibid* *patisandhi citta* Pali "Thoughts, entering the womb in a new existence, conception, re-birth: [पटिसन्धि] https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=pa%E1%B9%ADisandhi&searchhws=yes

²³ *Sibbana* Pali "seamstress"=greed, lust: https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=sibbana&searchhws=yes | सिब्बन ; sibbana ; sewing

for the development and maintenance of one's kamma²⁴.

However, there is one important element that defines one's actions as good or wholesome actions or bad and unwholesome actions, and this one element is "volition (kusala)"²⁵.

The one element that is present in all human actions is volition; one's will, one's reason for deciding. Having decided, then acting, expresses the reasoning behind one's actions.

Therefore, one's intentions are the determining factor or element of a persons' actions. Human intentions are expressed through our speech, our thinking, and our bodies, therefore, an unintentional action cannot be considered kamma nor hold any consequences. If we say something that we believe to be true, but later discover that our beliefs were false; this is not intentional action because there was no intent to deceive. Kamma only exists when there is intention behind the action.

Three Channels for Kamma

The vehicles for kamma are the body, our speech, and our thinking. These three things represent the three kinds of kamma. When an act involves or is done with the body, this is called *kayakamma*²⁶. Whenever we express our intentions verbally, this is called *vacikamma*²⁷.

Whenever we express our intentions mentally, such as planning, desiring, formulating, and so on, is called *manokamma*. Through these three avenues; doorways, our intentions become manifest (visible).

Intention (Volition)

How it is that ignorance factors into this is that many, if not most, of our perceptions and thinking are based on wrong views; the absence of the truth about the nature of a thing. Whichever of the three channels of kamma are expressed, whether singularly or in combination, our intentions become manifest either to ourselves or to ourselves and others.

Our reactions are learned responses to the experiences we have in life. Of course, not all of our perceptions are based on wrong views.

Many, again, if not most, of our perceptions, opinions, ideas, concepts, and beliefs, while not completely being based on wrong views, we do not possess the whole story; the big picture.



²⁴ Kamma: *Pali*: कम्म ; kamma ; deed ; action ; job ; work. Acting in general, action, deed, doing:

https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=kamma&searchhws=yes

²⁵ **Volition**, *Pali*: kusala "clever, skilful, expert; good, right, meritorious M i.226; Dh 44; J i.222. Esp. appl. in moral sense.

https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=kusala&searchhws=yes | कुशल ; kusala ; good action ; merit ; virtue.

²⁶ **Kayakamma** *Pali* कायकम्म ; kāyakamma ; bodily action. *Kaya* -kamma "bodily action," deed performed by the body in contradistinction to deeds by speech or thought. https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=k%C4%81ya&searchhws=yes

²⁷ **Vacikamma** *Pali* Vacī: "speech, words" https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=vac%C4%AB&searchhws=yes | Kamma: "n (vacī) -kamma (+kāya° & mano°) deed by

word" वचिकम्म ; vacikamma ; verbal action.

Often times we see and hear things that only provide us with incomplete information, then we base our beliefs, ideas, concepts and opinions on this incomplete information.

Moreover, we react to this incomplete information, causing wrong actions; actions that are based on partial knowledge or partial experience.

Volition; one's intentions, are the pivotal factor of all actions, and this action is called cetana kamma²⁸ (karma). A few examples would be if a person injures another person through an unintentional action, then there is no mental thought or pre-thought; no will that is the root cause of the action.

However, if a person intentionally injures another person, either physically or mentally, then the mental factor of ill-will is present and thus causes the action to establish negative kamma.

Alternatively, when a person's intentions are positive, mindful of helping, kind and compassionate, the resulting actions are constructive, this results in positive kamma or a positive karmic imprint. If a person is angry, greedy, selfish, and speaks with ridicule all the time, these conscious intentions are outwardly revealed in their actions. This behavioral activity plants negative or bad karmic imprints (seeds).

Kamma, Old, Present & Future

There is a lot of misunderstanding about kamma (karma). Happenstance and things that occur in our lives is not one's kamma. The events themselves, such as those that cause suffering, loss, and misery, are not kamma itself, but are the results of one's

kamma. Kamma only represents the active force behind the event. This is why seemingly bad things happen to good people.



Through heavy kamma, accumulated in past lives, we experience negative things in our present lives. It is important to understand that the way in which we react to present situations has a lot to do with sustaining negative kamma. In other words, if we react to something negative by responding negatively, we can enhance the negative kamma.

Whatever suffering or misery we may experience in the present does not define our past kamma. The way in which we react to present situations and circumstances is connected to future kamma.

²⁸ Cetana-kamma: *Pali* “Cetanā: state of ceto in action, thinking as active thought, intention, purpose, will. Defined as action. https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=cetan%C4%81&searchhws=yes | चेतना ; cetanā ; intention.



If your reaction to present situations or circumstances is rooted in ill-will, bad intentions, selfishness, greed, hate, and so on, then we are not only experiencing a present kamma, but we are adding to or strengthening past negative kamma. Rather than wallow in self-pity or react badly, take the opportunity to change the direction in which your future kamma will lead.

Classification of Kamma

A-kusala-kamma²⁹

(ah-koo-sah-lah-kah-mah)

&

Kusala-kamma³⁰

(koo-sah-lah-kah-mah)

According to the Buddha's teachings, these are the two classes of kamma. Akusalakamma is unwholesome or negative kamma. Kusalakamma is wholesome or positive kamma.

Not all of our actions produce kamma. In fact, most of our actions during the day are neutral, meaning that they do not produce any kamma at all; adding or detracting from our already accumulated kamma. But, it is important to be aware of our actions; being mindful of the things we say or do habitually.

For example, harming the Earth harms people. Whenever we abuse the Earth, causing destruction or contributing to its destruction, we are harming all sentient life on this planet. Being habitually careless is a form of ignorance. After all, one soda-can won't have a negative effect on the planet, one candy wrapper or cigarette butt doesn't matter. Destruction of the planet is evident in our modern times because 6 billion people are careless in some form or another with the Earth.

If you accidentally kill a bug or a squirrel runs out in front of your car, killing of this sort has no karmic value, it is neutral, because there was no premeditated ill-will or intentional will to kill. Accidents, such as car accidents, where human beings are injured or killed, have no karmic value, and are neutral, as long as the accident was not due to being selfish, careless, hateful or angry, and so on. Causing a fatal accident because of road rage would carry negative karmic weight.

All suffering, and the lack of happiness is caused by the three roots of unskillful, unwholesome actions, which are lobha³¹,

²⁹ Akusala-kamma Pali अकुसल ; akusala ; demerit; bad action; unskillful. "akusala (demeritorious, evil) and classified according to the manifestations into kāya" https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=kamma&searchhws=yes

³⁰ Kusala-kamma Pali कुसल ; kusala ; good action ; merit ; virtue. skilful, expert; good, right, meritorious M i.226; Dh 44; J i.222. Esp. appl. in moral sense (=puñña), With kamma=a meritorious action, D iii.157; Vv iii.27; Pv i.1011 see cpds. — ācāra -- k° good in conduct Dh 376. https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=kusala&searchhws=yes

³¹ Lobha Pali लोभ ; lobha ; greed ; covetousness. Found in triad of lobha, dosa, moha (greed, anger, bewilderment, forming the three principles of demerit.) https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=lobha&searchhws=yes

dosa³², and moha³³; desire, hatred and delusion.



Lobha, Dosa and Moha are A-kusala-kamma (ah-koo-sah-lah kah-mah); producing negative kamma. This Pali word is derived from the combination of two words, akusala and kamma. Akusala means something that is improper, wrong, bad; demeritorious, an evil deed. Combined with the word kamma, the word means improper, wrong, demeritorious, bad or an evil action. Conversely, the root word ‘kusala’³⁴ means clever, skillful, expert; good, right, or meritorious, and combined with the word kamma, means a clever, skillful, expert; good, right, or meritorious action.

Wholesome – Unwholesome? How to Distinguish

How is one to know whether an action is wholesome or unwholesome; an Akusalakamma or Kusalakamma?

All actions are generated from one’s will or intent. Again, many actions are kamma-neutral and so produce neither akusalakamma or kusalakamma. In simple terms, any action that is intended to cause harm to oneself, another or both, is unwholesome (akusalakamma).

Any action that is intended to cause happiness, loving-kindness, compassion, such as helping someone in need, is a wholesome action, therefore kusala-kamma.

Determining whether an action is purely beneficial and good or unbeneficial and bad can be tricky at times. If an action manifests, producing a result that ‘appears’ to be good, perhaps for oneself, but in some manner causes some level of damage to another, then can such an action be beneficial?

In order to determine the real intention behind any action, we must be able to see the mental roots of an action; from what intention does the root spring? Determining this is actually not difficult because the Buddha taught that all unwholesome, unbeneficial actions stem from greed, aversion and delusion. All negative (non-beneficial/unwholesome) actions can be traced back to these three things.



Greed can manifest in the form of insatiableness, dishonesty, gluttony, deceitfulness, fraudulence, omission of truth, duplicity, disloyalty, and so on. Greed is always rooted in the obtaining of personal gratification, which is a severe form of grasping, craving and attachment.

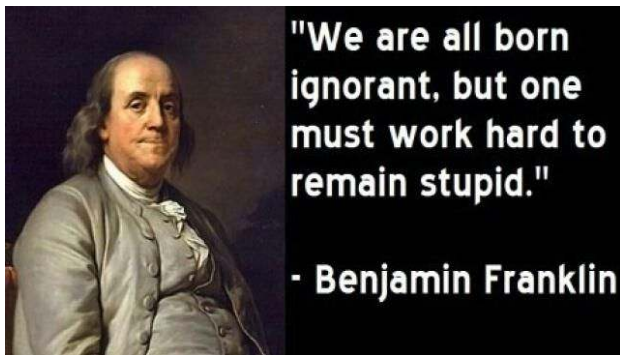
³² Dosa *Pali* दोस ; dosa ; anger ; corrupting ; defect ; fault. corruption, blemish, fault, bad condition, defect; depravity, corrupted state; ill-will, evil intention, wickedness, corruption, malice, hatred. https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=dosa&searchhws=yes

³³ Moha *Pali* मोह ; moha ; stupidity ; delusion; stupidity, dullness of mind, delusion, bewilderment, infatuation. https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=moha&searchhws=yes

³⁴ Kusala *Pali* *ibid* pg. 13 fn 39

Aversion manifests in the forms of hatred, loathing, distaste, repugnance, antipathy, antagonism, hostility, and so on. Aversion is rooted in negative perceptions such as resentment and hatred. Such aversion is seen in racism and resentment of certain races of people.

Delusion manifests in the forms of holding onto wrong thinking, wrong opinion, wrong knowledge, where things such as misinformation, misconception, misbelief, apathy, misrepresentations, half-truths, distortions, fabrications, fallacies, and misapprehensions are held onto as opinions, and beliefs without any effort to correct such views for the sake of convenience or simply laziness.



This is where ignorance breeds and thrives. A delusion, if known to be or possibly be untrue or incorrect, is held onto for the sake of 'being right' (pride) or for the sake of convenience. A common delusion might be when a certain political figure states that they are being falsely maligned, although mountains of evidence to the contrary exist. Believing only what one wants to believe for the convenience of having to do nothing to correct their knowledge, is delusion. Knowingly allowing delusion causes mental confusion, not only in oneself, but in others.

Non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion, of course, are wholesome states. Unlike the attachment one experiences with the unwholesome root of greed, beneficial actions are marked by a detachment and generosity. Being detached means having the ability and discipline to reject or renounce objects of desire, and craving. This state of being allows an individual to easily give away or donate valuable things to others.

Being in a state of non-aversion means that a person willingly, and freely acts in such a manner so as to exhibit or reveal goodwill, kindness and are naturally friendly. These attitudes produce positive, helpful and wholesome acts.

Mindful awareness, and mental clarity enhances the truth about the nature of reality. Being non-delusional or non-deluded supports wisdom, produces understanding, and keen awareness. There is no dullness of mind, but curiosity to obtain and comprehend the difference between things that are not true or only partially true.

Actions Don't Always Reveal the Intention

So, let's say, for example, there is a person who volunteers for programs, and always appears to be doing good things for other people. What if the underlying motive or intention of such a person is rooted in the desire to gain recognition?

Then there are those who seemingly perform good deeds with the underlying intention rooted in a kind of one-upmanship; their intentions are actually rooted in desire, to gain personal gratification. While the cost of such may not be outwardly harmful to others, such actions carry potential harm for the individual themselves.



Tibetan teacher Pema Chodron, has commented many times on the various difficulties one encounters in a monastery. She speaks of competition, jealousy, aversion, and other emotionally harmful conditions that she has encountered. She tells of fellow samaneras (monks in preparation for full ordination), have spoken of situations where a particular monk or nun, who is very disciplined, quiet, and seemingly appears to be stand-offish, distant and always meditating, is criticized as lazy or seeking attention. In contrast to an obvious do-gooder, the person is quietly dedicated, determined and is developing useful qualities that may benefit many.

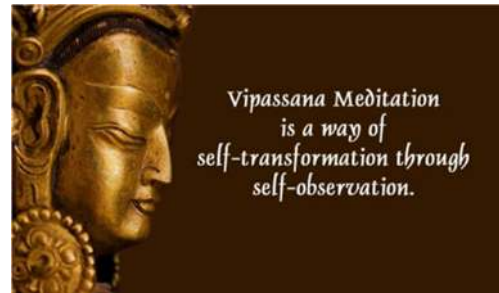
Refining Actions

One of the facets of the Buddha's teaching that has always amazed me is how complete in scope they are, no matter what the topic; that over twenty-five centuries ago, this man was able to discern and dissect the mental world of human beings to the fine degree that he did.

Further delineating wholesome and unwholesome actions, the Buddha defines the main forms of unwholesome, unbeneficial actions, into ten forms. These ten forms are known, in the Pali language, as *dasa akuslalakamma patha*³⁵. The word '*dasa*³⁶' means the number ten (10). The word '*patha*³⁷' means 'path,' 'roadway' or 'route.' The entire

phrase means 'ten unwholesome routes' or 'ten unwholesome pathways.'

All ten of the ten unwholesome (objectionable) actions are fueled by an unskilled state of mind (*akusala citta*³⁸). Unskilled or unskillful states of mind are promulgated by thoughts. An example might be thoughts revolving around or centered on sensual desires. Sensual desires are not limited to sexual desires. A sensual desire, sensual thinking, is marked by desires to satisfy the senses; sensory desires of the body, corporeal craving, cravings for taste, smell, sound, touch and even thinking.



For those who are new to practicing meditation, a sensual desire; a craving for calmness, craving for a calm mind, can become an unskillful state of mind. Craving for the peace and calm of meditation is a sure-fire sign that one is becoming overly attached to the practice. When one finds that meditation is necessary to calm oneself down, this signals an unskillful attachment to the practice. Meditation is a tool that is used to attain insight and control of one's unruly thinking in order to advance toward a state of *samadhi*.

³⁵ *dasa akuslalakamma patha Pali* "ten" "paths"

³⁶ *Dasa Pali* the number ten. https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=dasa&searchhws=yes

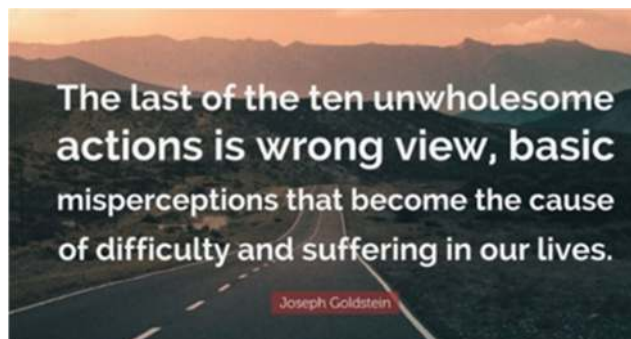
³⁷ *Patha Pali* पथ ; patha ; path ; way ; road. *Alt:* *apatha* where there is no way or road, wrong way.

https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=patha&matchtype=default

³⁸ *Akusala citta Pali* चित्त ; *citta* ; The heart ; the mind ; a thought , an idea ; will , intention. "The unskillful state of mind (*akusala citta*) = the unskillful state of mind with such things like sensual thought (*kama vitakka sahitam*). <https://accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel021.html>

Meditation is used to attain samatha³⁹ (calming the brain) to reach samadhi. Samadhi⁴⁰ is a concatenated (joined) word comprised of the Pali words “sama” & “adhi,” where “sama” means “same” and “adhi” means “dominance.” In other words, samadhi means that an object (of meditation-focus) becomes the priority and the thinking gets focused on the object. The object becomes the priority and the thinking becomes focused.

When the thinking becomes focused on one thought object (arammana⁴¹), no matter what the object is, the ekaggata (single pointedness) cetasika⁴² (mental factors) takes over, and causes the thinking to latch onto the object. When the brain thinking gets to a state of samadhi, the brain is calm because it is stopped from jumping back and forth among many thought objects (arammana).



The Ten Unwholesome Actions

Bodily

1. **Taking life.**
2. **Stealing, Theft:** Taking what does not belong to oneself.
3. **Sexual Misconduct:** Adultery, Seduction, and supporting others involved in sexual misconduct, to name a few.

Verbal

4. **Lying.** Speaking falsehoods of any kind.
5. **Slander:** Speaking slanderously, and divisive speech.
6. **Harsh Language:** Speaking harshly, derogatory language.
7. **Gossip:** Engaging in gossip, idle chatter, spreading falsehoods

Mental

8. **Greed:** Materialism; strongly yearning for the possessions of others; greedy intentions.

³⁹ **Samatha** Pali समथ ; samatha ; calm ; quietude of heart. https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=samatha&searchhws=yes

⁴⁰ **Samadhi** Pali समाधि ; samādhi ; meditation ; onepointedness of the mind. “1. concentration; a concentrated, self-collected, intent state of mind and meditation, which, concomitant with right living, is a necessary condition to the attainment of higher wisdom and emancipation.” https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=sam%81dhi&searchhws=yes

⁴¹ **Arammana** Pali आरम्भण ; ārammaṇa ; a sense-object. “ārammaṇa-kusala clever in the objects (of meditation). https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=%81ramma%E1%B9%87a&searchhws=yes

⁴² **Ekaggata cetasika** Pali एकगता ; ekaggatā ; Tranquillity of the mind , abstraction of the mind , contemplation.

चेतसिक ; cetasika ; mental ; a mental property; mind & all that belongs to it, mind and mental properties; cetasikas, with citta as bare consciousness, practically superseded in mental analysis. https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=cetasika&searchhws=yes

9. **Ill-Will:** Actively (intentionally) desiring harm, suffering or destruction to come to others.
10. **Wrong Thinking:** Holding onto wrong views; wrong opinions; wrong beliefs which denies truth; promulgates ignorance, holding fixed opinions based on wrong views.

The Ten Wholesome Actions

Wholesome actions could also be called virtuous actions. A virtuous action is one that is moral, honorable, good and does not prevent truth. The ten virtuous actions are basically the opposite of the ten unwholesome, non-virtuous actions.

Bodily

1. Not taking life. Avoiding killing any sentient being through exercising compassion and developing compassionate thinking.
2. Avoiding the taking of anything that is not offered or given. Developing honest thinking.
3. Developing pure thinking by avoiding sexual misconduct; avoiding the seeds of sexual misconduct through sensual pleasures that may take advantage of another's vulnerability.

Verbal

4. Dishonesty brings disharmony. Speak only whole truth.
5. Avoiding instances and opportunities that may support slandering another.
6. Refraining from talk or speech that is harsh; swearing; derogatory terms and phrases that are not polite or gentle.

7. Speaking only in meaningful ways, avoiding gossip, and situations that promote gossip.

Mental

8. Being satisfied with the things one has; avoiding envy, and greed.
9. Developing lovingkindness towards all; avoiding intentions of ill-will.
10. Removing wrong thinking, opinions, beliefs, views, ignorance by learning right thinking.

Kamma is Who We Are

Kamma is the cornerstone, the foundation for all of the teachings of the Buddha, who taught that our intentional actions produce consequences, and it is these actions that build our Kammic (Karmic) Profile; our karmic imprint.



Not all consequences of our kamma happen in the future, we may think that we don't have to worry about our kamma in this lifetime. However, the Buddha taught that kamma has two kinds of effects. One is an immediate, visible effect, usually noticeable psychologically. The other will be discussed a little further in this essay.

Our intentional, volitional actions not only determine our characters, and our personalities, but defines not only the person we are, but the type of being we are. We might believe that our personalities; our characteristics, are an amalgam of our

childhood rearing, cultural, economic and social elements. In reality, our personalities are actually a mixture of all of our willed actions, which include our willed actions in many other lifetimes. This is accumulated kamma; our karmic imprint.

Following intentional habits that we formed in other lifetimes, perhaps due to cultural or social influences, we repeat our habit-making and decisions based on our intentions in this life. These intentional decisions and habits multiply, building one atop another, which causes the personality and characteristics that we experience now.

Family, social, cultural, economic influences can weigh heavy on us to the point of yielding or weakening our thinking, whereby, our thinking becomes influenced in unwholesome and unhealthy ways.

Unskilled in the ability to understand and see when we give-in, we begin to build-up greediness, bad speech, become more aggressive and hostile, give in to gossiping and slander of public figures, famous personalities, people we work with, and our own families.

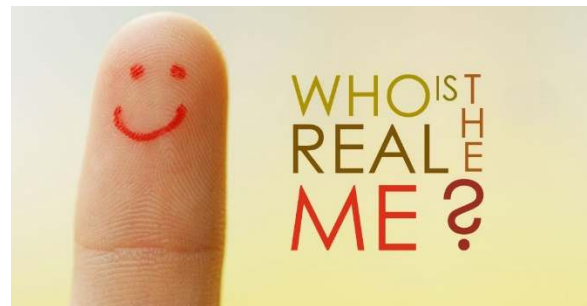
Our intentional actions are like testimony of our character, and we influence other people, like our children, co-workers, friends and relatives, with our behavior. The more we pile these things onto our karmic imprint, the more likely they are to influence and have consequences in future lives, reducing our probability for happiness.

Have you ever met a person; an acquaintance that you have not seen for many years, and they comment on how much you have changed. “Wow, you used to be such a kind person.” “You have changed a lot. You used to be gentle and shy.”

The reason that we develop unskillful, unwholesome characteristics is because these happen slowly, little-by-little. Over time, we build up patterns of behavior. Allowing ourselves to develop habits that are unwholesome or unskillful, is a kind of intentional behavior. We could certainly realize that certain of our habits or thinking do not provide us with good, pleasant or happy results, and intentionally change course; change the direction of our kamma.

But, in order to be able to do this, change our unwholesome actions, we have to be mindful of the difference between wholesome and unwholesome actions.

Some actions, of course, are quite commonsense because they are obvious, such as chemical addictions, lying, stealing, harming others with our speech and so on, causing not only others, but ourselves to suffer. Every action (kamma) that we perform intentionally, effects our stream of consciousness, and that stream of consciousness encompasses all of our actions, good and bad, wholesome and unwholesome, to one degree or another.



Mindfulness; being aware of our actions, and those things that cause suffering, is the first step. We must be able to see that our thinking causes us to hold wrong views. In other words, we must be able to step back from ourselves and see our own ignorance.

This is always harder than it sounds. We do not want to give up our story-line. Our story-line is fifty-percent about how we want others to perceive us, and fifty-percent of how we justify our behavior, beliefs and opinions. But, we don't always know or even see the truth about ourselves. Seeing oneself as one actually is, takes courage and conviction, and a kind of generosity toward ourselves; kindness toward ourselves.

All of this represents a psychological effect of our actions; our kamma, on our overall stream of consciousness.

Effect of Present Kamma on Future Kamma

Our past kamma; our past actions, may not 'sprout,' so-to-speak, in the next life we experience. At times, past kamma can take a very long time to become active, depending on the circumstances of a present life. Both a negative and positive kamma can lay dormant until circumstances exist that causes an element in our karmic imprint to become active.



For example, let's say that hundreds of lifetimes ago a person was a notorious thief. Many lifetimes pass and the person has not encountered any circumstances that cause this karmic imprint to become active. In the present day, social and cultural morals have decayed.

Many people think, albeit in the back of their minds, that everyone takes things because

they feel it is their right, perhaps because the example of public figures, such as politicians, has caused people to think that if they do not take what they believe is owed to them, then they will lose out. So, the circumstances become fertile for the karmic imprint of theft to become active.

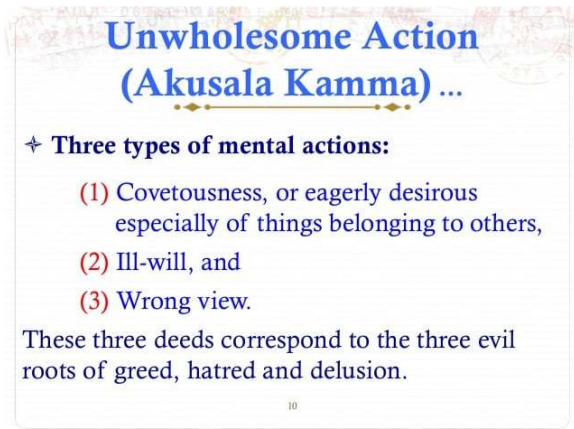
The influence of this karmic imprint causes the person to justify theft, perhaps initially on some small level, becoming more prevalent with the passing of time. Justification of some unwholesome activity is willed-action; intentional. Therefore, our past kamma is not some mechanical 'thing,' rather it is a living, active element of our being.

Unwholesome karmic imprints; karmic propensities do not become active on their own by some law of kamma, by necessity. All intentional actions tend to become active; have a possibility to become active. The right conditions must be met. However, this does not mean that a karmic imprint or karmic tendency cannot be destroyed entirely, never activating at all in future lifetimes. A karmic imprint or tendency must be presented with an opportunity to become active. If the conditions are not present, then a karmic tendency lies dormant.

It is for all of these reasons that developing mindful awareness of our way of life; our way of thinking; the opinions we hold and the beliefs we maintain, define our character; our personalities. Our conduct and our attitudes can influence our past or dormant kamma. Our karmic imprint, which is composed of all of our past actions (kammās), are conditioned by how we live, and the way we live in the present. Good kammās, like bad kammās produce results in our present life.

A person who is ignorant of this knowledge, carelessly or heedlessly leads themselves to activate past bad kammās, sometimes, many

times, hindering any good kmmas from becoming active and remaining active.



In his teaching of kamma, the Buddha made it very clear that we are our kamma. We inherit our kamma from our previous karmic imprints. Developing mindful awareness through meditation helps us to see our unwise, unwholesome bad habits; our unskillful way of thinking and living.

Seeing oneself as one truly is; seeing our true characters and personalities, helps to uncover the ignorance we have been living with. By opening our hearts, and our thinking, to usher in right views about ourselves, opens to us opportunities to destroy bad karmic imprints forever.

The Buddha taught that there are three types or kinds of kamma.

Three Kinds of Kamma

1. Present-life kamma
2. Next-life kamma
3. Future-life kamma (robust/strongest type of kamma)

Present-life and Next-life kamma represents a type of kamma that is not necessarily very strong kamma. Comparing present and next-life kamma to future-life kamma; it is future-life kamma that holds the strongest influence.

However, Present and next-life kamma are not as strong, meaning that if this kamma does not come to fruition; does not activate, in the present or the next life, then this karmic element becomes null, nonoperational, obsolete and will never become active.

Future-life kamma is the form of kamma or karmic imprint that we really have to pay attention to, and be ever mindful. Future-life kamma can remain with us forever or as long as we continue in the cycle of samsara, rebirth and death. Future-life kamma is powerful, and can find opportunities to become active for hundreds of thousands of future lifetimes.

A property of kamma or karmic imprint, of karmic elements, have a kind of time-lag. This time-lag is evident all around us. We see good people who meet with horrible suffering, and bad people that seem to land on their feet no matter what. A good person who suffers greatly is experiencing bad karmic elements from a previous life or lifetimes.

If the person remains a good person, a person who does not intentional harm anyone, will eventually reap the rewards of their good intentions; good actions; good behavior, and so on. The reverse of this is a bad person; one whose intentions stem from ill-will; greed and so on, in the present life, but who enjoys great wealth, health, and ease of life now, will suffer the consequences of these unwholesome actions in a future life.

Kamma: No hard and fast rules of results.

Every individual's karmic imprint is wholly of their own making. No other individual is responsible for another person's actions or reactions. Whatever the reason, wholesome of unwholesome, good or bad, we make decisions based on our perceptions, beliefs, and habitual thinking.

Our decisions and our actions are choices we make; choices of how to act and react. The quality of our entire life is based on our reactions to influences of all sorts. However, kamma; our karmic imprints, do not produce results the same way. There are two ways in which kamma produces results.

The first, is the type of rebirth we experience. In other words, all of our kamma; our accumulated karmas that create our karmic imprint, influences our rebirth consciousness. The other way in which kamma produces results are distinguished by the things we encounter and experience throughout our lives.

When the body deteriorates to the point of dying, a person's most predominant kamma comes to the forefront of the stream of consciousness. This predominating kamma contains the elements that determine a person's new life; next rebirth.

When the new life matures, from an infant into adulthood, to old age, this is when our karmic elements; our karmic imprint either become active or dormant or are destroyed. This essentially means that the new life will experience both favorable and unfavorable experiences; talents, spiritual progress, wealth, health or misfortunes, suffering, and obstacles that deter success, and spiritual growth. This process is completely natural and uninfluenced by any other entity or person.

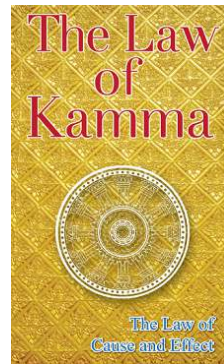
Karmic results, whether good or bad, happens autonomously by what the Buddha called kamma niyama; the natural order or course of kamma.

Is Kamma a Punishment?

All human beings produce the results of their kamma naturally; whether the results are good or bad. It is the perfect judgement system,

whereby kamma follows the natural laws of cause and effect. Therefore, it is incorrect; a wrong view, that kamma should be thought of as punishment. The natural karmic law of cause and effect can be seen all around us.

We see people who live incredibly long and healthy lives, while others are sickly and die early in their life. There are people who have very beautiful features and are pleasant to look at, while others are ugly, misshapen or have deformities. Some are born blind, deaf, or mentally afflicted in some way. Is kamma a cause for these differences?



The answer to that question comes directly from the Buddha. With the laws of cause and effect, kamma operates in a field of ranking, if you will. Rebirth consciousness must be present to determine what role, which karmic elements

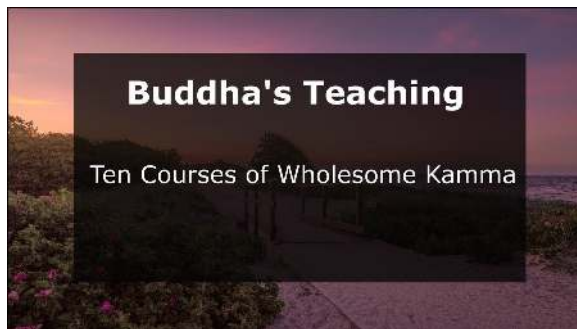
take. Therefore, it can be said that kamma is ranked by priorities. There are all sorts of kamma and it is, what might be called 'heavy' kamma that takes precedence.

If a person's rebirth consciousness (stream of consciousness) holds very weighty kamma, such as a morally weighty kamma, this kamma will take precedence, whether the weight or significance is on a wholesome or unwholesome element. For instance, if the karmic significance is bound to the taking of life, say for example, killing one's mother or father, taking the life of an arahant or wounding a Buddha or causing a division in a sangha, these hold significantly unwholesome moral weight. At the time of such a person's death, this significant kamma will come to the forefront, and this action determines the

person's rebirth. Such a person will experience a rebirth of intense suffering and misery.

Conversely, a person who has substantially significant wholesome kamma, attain rebirth in higher states of birth consciousness. Such persons attain the conscious states of the jhanas; higher states of samadhi, and enjoy happiness and less suffering.

It is important to note that if there is no especially or particularly heavy moral kamma, good or bad, then kamma automatically defers to ethical kamma, particularly if the ethical action is done close to the time of death. Kammas (actions) that are done or performed close to the time of death are known as 'death proximate' kammas.



These good kammas (actions) result in a good rebirth. The best example of this would be, for example, a person who is responsible for the intentional death of another or other human beings, but may become deeply remorseful for their deeds, becoming filled with compassion and the desire to change. If genuine, may lead to a favorable rebirth. However, their evil actions are not wiped clean from the stream of consciousness. Such a person could still experience great suffering in future lives.

Since kamma works both ways, meaning that the results of a person's actions, good or bad, is determined by the laws of cause and effect, then a person who may have lived a very good life, moral and ethical, but upon being faced

with death becomes filled with regrets, fear, and greed, this 'death-proximate' consciousness could produce unwholesome results, leading this person to experience a lower form of rebirth; perhaps experiencing suffering. This, however, does not mean that such a person relinquishes or forfeits their good ethical and moral kamma. This person's good kamma will result in future good effects. Remember, there is always a time-lag with kamma, particularly in dependence on one's 'death-proximate' consciousness and actions.

Now, rebirth, which is affected by moral, ethical, and death-proximate kamma produce specific results. What happens when there is no specifically significant death-proximate kamma? Perhaps a person is unconscious when they die, and so does not generate a death-proximate kamma. In such a case, habitual kamma takes precedence. This form of kamma is actually the most prevalent form of kamma that influences an individual's type of rebirth.

Habitual kamma are actions that an individual performs habitually throughout their lives. This type of kamma is predominant with most rebirths. For example, a person could spend their lives habitually acting in a manner that results in apathy, laziness, always disgruntled, unhappy with their lot in life, mean spirited, overbearing, exhibiting aloofness to the point of not caring about anything, sullen, habitually trying to get out of work, feigning illnesses, medical conditions, sadness, habitual sexual actions, and so on. These not only have an effect on a person's death-proximate kamma, but create a strong habitual kamma that will affect the type of rebirth. This is important to understand because kamma does not always produce rebirth in the human realm.

Places (Planes) of Rebirth

For many, particularly those raised in the West, wrapping our heads around the idea that there are other places where beings can exist is asking a lot. Most people are at least familiar with the concept of heaven in the Judeo-Christian worldview. People hold some skepticism about this concept, so it might be more difficult believing in different realms of existence. However, the teachings of the Buddha do not create a vision of concept of a material realm as does the Judeo-Christian worldview.

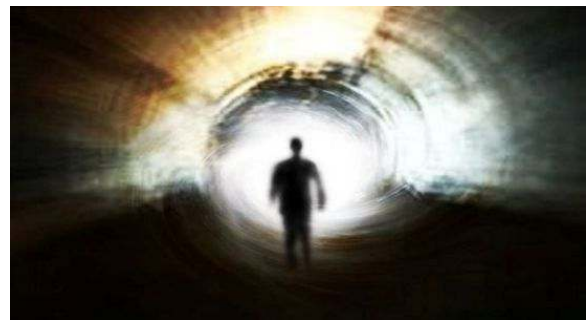
Persons in the West have a more scientific approach to life, and the things that they are willing to accept as true or real. Therefore, it may be more difficult for persons raised and educated in the West to comprehend the idea of different realms of existence.

Upon hearing, for the first time, the concepts of the Buddha's teachings of these various realms of existence and rebirth, Westerners are more likely to consider these teachings to be fairytale-like, ancient or too loaded down with superstition to consider them to be credible.

However, learning about and understanding the logical order of the laws of kamma (karma), in consideration of the plethora of actions human beings are capable of exhibiting, the concept of different planes of existence makes more sense.

All human actions, good and bad, have some consequences attached to them, making it more probable that there would need to be a rebirth consequence attached to one's karmic imprint; one's actions during their lifetimes. Otherwise, an individual who is a murderer, a thief, a despot would be subject to the same rebirth as a person who has lived well, is compassionate, loving, generous and kind.

In the Western view, it might make more sense to describe the various rebirth realms in terms of justification or judgement of one's actions; one's kamma, during their lifetime. Therefore, given that the laws of kamma are directly based on one's own actions, the consequences of those actions yielding a rebirth commensurate with or proportionate to and equal to those actions seems quite logical. In a simpler sense, one's actions can only deliver a particular rebirth in consequence of those actions.



To help with this concept, think on the different experiences that human beings have at present. When we sleep, this is a different mental realm than when we are awake. When we are frightened, this is also a different realm of mental existence. When we experience great sadness or great suffering, we are in a different mental realm of existence. All of these experiences are all very real. We can have nightmares that cause us to become frightened, and sometimes when we awaken we remember the nightmare and experience uneasy feelings. This is a separate realm of existence when we experience such things. Dependent on death-proximate kamma, and on other things that create our karmic imprint, as discussed earlier, it is one's own kamma that directs what realm we will be reborn into.

Various Rebirth Realms

Plane of Misery

Of the many realms of rebirth contain divisions or levels. Although these various realms may be difficult to comprehend, you are not alone. Since humans live their entire lives on the material realm of existence, it is sometimes difficult to wrap our heads around existing in any other type of experience but the material realm. However, taking the time to understand the different types of kamma will help in understanding how and why the various realms of existence apply.

Probably the most severe of the various kamma realms is what is known as the “Sense-Fear Realm.” This realm contains six levels or divisions. Remember, these realms are not material realms, but mental realms of experience, which means experiencing something like the Sense-Fear Realm is like a dream. In a dream, there is no body that you are aware of, but merely the mental and emotional experience. This means the experience is a part of an individual’s stream of consciousness.

In the Sense-Fear Realm the experience is one of intense mental torment and suffering. This includes what is referred to in the Pali texts as those who experience affliction known as Hungry Ghosts (petayoni⁴³). A Hungry Ghost experience is the mental affliction of a being with strong desires, such as hunger and thirst, which can never be satisfied.

Imagine the experience of having a large body, a large stomach, with a tiny little mouth, the size of a pin hole. The mental anguish experienced is one of always searching for

food and drink in vain, because they can never get enough. This depiction may bring up images of persons that you know who are gluttonous, greedy, to the extent that they never seem to be satisfied with what they have.

Another realm is that of the animal realm where the central distinguishing mental state is of beings who exhibit a dullness of mind, but exhibit strong and brutish desires. These states are marked by the mental state of base instincts, devoid of the ability to reason or develop the idea of compassion.

The next realm is known as the Asura Realm. The mental experience in this realm is of titanic, powerful beings that are completely dominated by extremely strong passions. The experience in this realm is the overwhelming desire for power, control, ambition, war and competitiveness. This realm produces beings that are always ready for a fight, and are frequently depicted as fighting with beings in other realms.

All of these aforementioned realms are known as the Plane of Misery, which are considered to be states of rebirth that are unfortunate and undesirable. However, the Sense-Fear Realm contains two good or desirable planes of existence.

The Human Realm & Deva Realm

Before explaining the human realm, describing what the Deva Realm is, and what a deva is, helps to dissolve and misunderstandings. The word “deva” is one of those words that are subject to confusion because the Pali word has leached into modern vocabulary. The English word “deva” is not the same as the Pali word “deva.” The

⁴³ Petayoni *Pali* पेतयोनि ; petayoni ; state of ghosts; gone past, gone before, dead, departed; leading usually a miserable existence as the result of avarice kamma (greed, materialism, covetousness): https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=peta&searchhws=yes

Pali word “deva” simply means “shining” or “bright.”

The human realm and the deva realm are considered good planes of existence. Rebirth into either of these two realms is the result of one’s good kamma; having a good karmic imprint. Existence in both of these realms however, is still impermanent. Devas, although enjoying longer lives, grow old, and pass away. Devas also are not all wise and knowing, like the depiction of gods, angles, and demons in the Judeo-Christian worldview sense.

None of the realms considered to be fortunate or good realms compares to the human realm, according to the Buddha. The reason for this is because it is within the human realm that beings are able to experience and exhibit the balance of all the mental and physical forces. Furthermore, it is only in the human realm that beings are able to experience the qualities of experiencing what the Buddha called “the middle way.”

While human beings can certainly experience extremes of physical, mental and emotional actions, life in the Middle Way is not so unbelievably unbearable causes abject misery and suffering. Life in the human realm allows for the experience of pleasure, comforts, thinking and reasoning, which allows humans to reflect on their own mental states. Humans also enjoy a balance of abilities to develop our understanding in terms of the nature of our own existence. In terms of liberation from suffering, we are able to become self-awakened. We are able to contemplate the impermanent nature of our own life as-well-as the impermanence of everything around us.

In the deva realm, beings have very long lives, but they are still subjected to impermanence. Although the deva realm is a very happy realm to be reborn into, it is still not permanent.

Whether one is reborn into the human realm or the deva realm, the cause is that one’s kamma is filled with elements of the ten wholesome actions or wholesome kammass.

Rebirth into an Unhappy Realm

Realms that are not happy or desirable places to be reborn are known, in the Pali texts, as the planes of misery and contain four undesirable states of existence. Rebirth into one of these four realms happens because one’s kamma is filled with the ten unwholesome actions or unwholesome kamma.

As mentioned earlier, the consequences of an individual’s actions (their kamma) leading to rebirth in an unhappy or undesirable realm takes place because their actions are marked by:

1. Taking life
2. Stealing
3. Engaging in sexual misconduct (adultery and seduction)
4. Speaking falsehood
5. Speaking slander
6. Speaking harshly
7. Speaking gossip and idle chatter
8. Covetous thinking (intentions)
9. Attitude of ill-will
10. Holding wrong views



2 Akusala-vaci-kamma

There are 4 unwholesome verbal actions:

- 4 *Musāvādā* – lying,
- 5 *Pisunavācā* – slandering,
- 6 *Pharusavācā* – rude or harsh speech,
- 7 *Samphappalāpa* – vain talk or foolish babble.

3 Akusala-mano-kamma

There are 3 unwholesome mental actions:

- 8 *Abhijjhā* – covetousness,
- 9 *Vyāpāda* – ill-will
- 10 *Micchāditthi* – wrong view

Now, these ten things are closely linked. Therefore, one cannot say that, for example, a person who only holds wrong views is not subject to rebirth in an undesirable realm. Consider that an individual who takes life, certainly exhibits wrong views, just as a person who steals, lies, speaks falsely and slanderous, and so on, is a person who exhibits wrong views.

All ten of these unwholesome actions can be connected to an attitude of ill-will or bad intentions. Each of these unwholesome actions or activities contains elements of each. These cannot be isolated one from the other.

There are the desirable realms of rebirth, and these are the consequences of an individual's wholesome actions (kamma). Each wholesome action may be considered an act that merits wholesome consequences, such as the practice of generosity, observation of moral discipline, development of one's ability toward simple meditation practice, acting toward others with loving kindness, and developing honesty. When these things are involved in generating rebirth, the consequence is rebirth in to happy realm; human rebirth or the deva realm.

Higher (Desirable) Levels of Rebirth

As was mentioned earlier, the actions of an individual produce different levels or types of kamma. Requisite with higher levels of kamma, comes higher or more desirable realms of rebirth. These realms of rebirth are marked by, what the Buddha teaches, as a

“fine material realm.” This is a realm of very refined matter.

These realms are attained because an individual has attained high-meditative states of understanding, known as the jhanas. A state of jhana⁴⁴ is a highly developed state of deep concentration; of a consciousness that is deeply absorbed; highly focused and tranquil.

Such a person is able to completely calm the brain's activities to the point of absolute stillness. Each of the jhana levels, of which there are four, consist of different depths. When a jhana is maintained throughout one's life, up until death, the consequence is rebirth in one of the fine material realms.

Course types of matter, such as is experienced in the human realm, do not exist. There is material form, but it is very refined, very delicate. Within these fine material realms, the stream of consciousness is pure and clear. Lifespans in these realms is incredibly long (by human standards), and are measured in terms of multiple eons.

However, existence in the fine material realm also comes to an end. Beings in this realm are still subject to the consequences of their kamma (actions). Therefore, rebirth from these realms is also determined by kamma.

Just when you thought there were no higher realms of existence, the Buddha taught that beyond the fine material realm, beyond the kamma of the jhanas, there exists even higher levels of samadhi⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ Jhana *Pali* ज्ञान ; jhāna ; concentration of mind ; meditation; meditation on objects & from burning up anything adverse; literally meditation. But it never means vaguely meditation. It is the technical term for a special experience, reached in a certain order of mental states. Becomes suffused with a sense of ease. Becomes aware of pure lucidity of mind & equanimity of heart. The whole really forms one series of mental states.

⁴⁵ Samadhi: (Samādhi [fr. saṇ+ā+dhā] 1. concentration; a concentrated, self-collected, intent state of mind and meditation, which, concomitant with right living, is a necessary condition to the attainment of higher wisdom and liberation.)

These higher levels of concentration are called the Four Formless Attainments and mark a state of extreme concentration within a scope of infinite space, and consciousness, which is an existence of neither perception or non-perception.

For those who attain such a state of concentration are said to take rebirth into a non-material, formless existence, where all matter comes to an end, meaning that this is an entirely a mental state of existence, where the stream of consciousness exists free from material forms.

These beings reside in pure peace and pure calmness. The lifespans of such beings last for thousands of eons. However, even in this existence, these beings are subject to their kamma, and so their time of existence becomes exhausted and they take rebirth in a realm depending on their kamma, which could be the same realm, but unlikely.

Really, Really Bad Kamma

Everyone is curious to know what happens to certain people who are responsible for the deaths of hundreds or thousands of people. Of course, the most infamous is that of Adolph Hitler. Person's whose kamma is filled with Intense, intentional cruelty creates very negative kamma, heavy with such actions as murder, killing, maiming, and so on, are destined for rebirth in a realm of great, unimaginable intense suffering, loss, and deprivation. Sometimes these realms are called the "hell realms," but the English word hell is

does not quite transmit the meaning of the concept of this realm.

The word "hell" is derived from the ancient Greek word 'hades' as was used in the English translations of the Bible. In the Old Testament (the Hebrew scriptures) the word 'hell' is derived from the Hebrew word 'sheol'⁴⁶ and the Greek word 'Gehenna.' All of these early versions of the word 'hell' carried the same meaning, which is a place of suffering, a state of misery and bad experiences.

The word Gehenna is actually the name of the place where the people living in ancient Jerusalem dumped their garbage and dead criminals, which was sanitized using chunks of sulfur to burn the contents of the dump. But, the Pali word that is translated into the English word 'hell' is actually 'naraka'⁴⁷, meaning a realm of suffering, and experiences of great torment. Again, this does not necessarily mean that this realm is a physical realm as much as it is a psychologically based or mental realm of suffering.

Taking into consideration all of these things with regard to one's actions, the different realms of existence begin to make sense.

It is very important to understand that the reason for the different realms of existence is the condition of our own consciousness. If our stream of consciousness is filled with unwholesome thinking, deeds, and actions, these are matched with the consequential

⁴⁶ Sheol *Origin def* שְׁאוֹל, Hebrew word of uncertain etymology; 1590s, from Hebrew, literally "the underworld, Hades," of unknown origin. Used in R.V. in place of Hell in many passages. (Old Testament) The realm of the dead, the common grave of mankind, Hell. In older English translations of the Bible, notably the Authorized Version or King James Bible, this word sheol is translated inconsistently and variously as grave (31 times), pit (3 times) or hell (31 times): <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Sheol> | <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13563-sheol>

⁴⁷ Naraka *Pali* नरक ; naraka (sometimes) निरय ; niraya: अपाय ; apāya ; the hell ; state of loss and woe ; lapse ; loss: a transient state of loss and woe after death. Four such states are specified niraya, rebirth as an animal: https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=ap%C4%81ya&searchhws=yes

realm of rebirth. It is for this reason that we must become aware of our thinking and our subsequent actions.

When we least expect it, we could entertain thoughts of ill-will, intense hatred, loathing and express ourselves accordingly with some form of violence or one of the other ten unwholesome acts. We may set in motion the possibility of life in an undesirable realm, and this, even more-so if this consciousness is present at the time of death, creating a death-proximate kamma.

By actively practicing meditation, even at a very basic level, we are training our thinking to comprehend our thinking, comprehending our subsequent actions, so that we can correct our ignorance; our wrong views, changing our stream of consciousness from unwholesome, un-beneficial to wholesome and beneficial to ourselves and others.

The Role of Equanimity

Throughout our lives we experience moments when selfishness, strong desire, clinging, anger, jealousy, enmity, envy, and so on enters our stream of consciousness. In order to protect ourselves from developing unwholesome actions, we need to be aware of when these things happen so that we don't plant the seeds of these things that we may adopt and which will reveal themselves in our actions. To do so, can cause us to set ourselves up for rebirth in one of the undesirable realms. Thus, it is important to develop a state of equanimity.

To live and thrive in a state of equanimity now means to strive to remain neutral; to strive and work things out quickly and calm

the occasional unwholesome states so that we don't end up acting while be affected by our own unwholesome emotions.

It is interesting to note that the word 'equanimity' is translated from the Pali word 'upekkha⁴⁸.' A literal translation of this Pali word means to be disinterested, neutral feeling, a looking onward without any feeling or emotion; looking on; neutrality or indifference, zero point between joy & sorrow. So, the teaching then is, rather than becoming absorbed in the resultant emotions grounded in selfishness, desires, clinging, anger, jealousy, envy, and so on, we take steps to recognize these and react indifferently; neither prone to joy or sorrow.

The reaction then is one of neutrality. Now, of course we will experience the emotions of our thinking, but this does not mean we must or need to react to them. Instead, we can step back, acknowledge the emotion, but react in a way that reveals the presence of equanimity.

Practicing the art of staying in equanimity takes time and effort. Like the Buddha taught in the first two Noble Truths, we must first see and acknowledge the things about ourselves that cause our suffering. Seeing the emotions build and acknowledging one's subsequent actions is the first step to gaining control of your thinking, then actively diverting your reaction into equanimity; neutrality.

Kamma, Rebirth and Perception

Of course, we live in a material world. Our perceptions are trained to interact with this material existence. Therefore, it is understandable that when thinking of rebirth,

⁴⁸ Upekkha *Pali* उपेक्खा ; upekkhā ; neutrality ; equanimity ; indifference; उपेक्खा ; Indifference to pain and pleasure , equanimity , resignation , stoicism. hedonic neutrality or indifference, zero point between joy & sorrow; disinterestedness, neutral feeling, equanimity: https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=upekkh%C4%81%20&%20upekh%C4%81&searchhws=yes

particularly in terms of other planes of existence, we may naturally visualize a human being existing or appearing in these realms.

Not unlike our understanding of the stream of consciousness, sometimes referred to as ‘mind,’ as something separate from the brain, in the same way we can understand that rebirth into many of the various realms is not always physical. For example, human beings exist in physical form, in a dream state or when under hypnosis.

The stream of consciousness does not differentiate between being in a physical form or not. At times, we make awaken from a dream thinking that it was very real. Sometimes we awaken from a dream or a nightmare and, for a moment, our brain thinks the dream or nightmare is real and so the brain generates the requisite chemicals to generate fear, happiness, worry, and so on. But, the experience only exists completely in the consciousness. This is similar to the experiences of different realms of rebirth, except of course that of the human and animal realms known as the sense-realms.

Studies in VMBR⁴⁹, “Visio-Motor Behavior Rehearsal” as reported in the International Journal of Pharma and Bio Sciences, reveals that when an athlete is subjected to the sounds and visualizations of performance, the physiological responses were identical to their responses as when they actually performed their sport.

What is revealed is that the brain does not know whether the physical activities are actually happening, the body’s response is the same as when the athlete is actually performing. In several studies using VMBR,

the results show the same peptides, hormones, galvanic skin responses, heart-rate, and muscle activity are nearly identical whether the athlete is subject to VMBR or running the actual race.

This is scientific evidence that as long as the brain thinks the body is doing something the reactions will be the same, much the same as when we have a particularly lucid dream or nightmare. We may wake up in a sweat or experience a rise in heart rate and blood pressure. The stream of consciousness is only aware of the conscious state of being, not the physical state. Considering the scientific evidence then, it should not be as difficult to understand that the state of being or ‘beingness’ is a perception of reality held within the stream of consciousness. This is exactly what it is like in the various non-physical realms.

But, this understanding may lead to some questions what it is that connects our volitional actions (intentional actions) to the various forms of rebirth. Like the conscious states we experience when dreaming, where there is no actual material interrelation, our stream of consciousness registers the mental events. Our accumulated intentional or volitional actions are recorded, first, in the brain, while we are living in the material world.

However, these recorded intentions are stored within that stream of consciousness, like seeds, which contain our volitions.

Often times, if not most times, we are completely aware of why we react and do the things we do. No one can hide their intentions from themselves. In the heat of a moment, we may not always be able to step

⁴⁹ VMBR: Visio-Motor Behavior Rehearsal

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290559646_Visuomotor_behaviour_rehearsal_in_enhancing_motor_ability_in_soccer_performers

back and see or comprehend the root of our intentions, whether the root is greed, grasping, craving, anger, envy, and so on, but in essence it does not actually matter if we are completely aware of these things at the moment of the actions and subsequent execution of our emotions. Our actions are the visible effects of our intentions, which if repeated habitually, become our karmic imprint; who we really are.

This karmic imprint of our intentional actions determines where and how rebirth takes place. Each plane of existence corresponds to the karmic imprint we have at the time of death, which is also, as mentioned earlier, affected by any death-proximate kamma we may have. Therefore, the planes of existence provide a means; a platform; in which the stream of consciousness works out the accumulated kamma.

All of this corresponds to the teachings of the Buddha who stated that it is this consciousness that creates all worlds, and it is the consciousness that dominates everything. Without consciousness there would be, could not be, from a human standpoint, no experience at all. Our personal world is the absolute concrete expression of our intentions and the associated subsequent actions.

Your Present Life Perspective

Learning about and understanding the effects that our actions have on our rebirth is reason enough to take a serious look at our perspective of our present life; how we live life; why we live our lives. Everyone wants to live, but living in and of itself is not the goal for most people. We want to be happy, free from stress, worry, pain and anguish. In order to achieve any level of happiness, and guarantee ourselves a desirable rebirth, it is not less than critical that we take an inventory

of all of the intentions that lay behind our actions.

Now, many people can blame their present life's unhappiness and misfortune on bad kamma. But, this is not always the case. Additionally, we cannot always blame our present circumstances or situations on external things either, things such as our culture, our society, our environment, our genetic heredity or on how we may have been raised as children. Some of these things may have some roots in our karmic imprint developed through prior lives, but much of what we experience now is due to our own ignorance, greed, ill-will, and so on, that determines who we are right now.

To a degree, it is our intentions and subsequent actions, good or bad, wholesome or unwholesome, that make us who we are. The circumstances of our present lives are connected to our past karmic seeds. If the circumstances of our lives present us with opportunities to express intentions of greed, anger, lovingkindness, and compassion, and our actions reveal such intentions, then we are giving rise to karmic seeds already present in our karmic imprint. This concept is something the Buddha taught, in that he said we are all responsible for what we are.

Kammic seeds or kammic influence exist because of actions in our past. Therefore, if we do not recognize when our intentions lead to certain actions, such as the actions anger or greed might create, then we are watering the seeds of our past kamma; keeping the wheel of samsara (the cycle of birth and death) in motion. This extends to our personality and our psycho-emotional character. In this sense then, we are the inheritors of our own actions in both the past and the present.

Kamma is not Punishment

It is because of the teaching of kamma and rebirth; the actions and conditions, that many criticize the Buddha's teachings as pessimistic and nihilistic. However, when the teachings of kamma are understood in connection with the Four Noble Truths, we can comprehend that we are not prisoners of our past kamma. The reason behind this is that we are not subject to submit, hands-down, to our past kamma. Through meditation, we learn to calm the thinking brain, and to see, with full comprehension, how our intentions link us to our actions.

It is important to consider that our intentions, our volitional actions, can only be experienced in the present. What this means is that we have an opportunity to change the effects of our past kamma and to even eradicate the kammic seeds.

We can actually neutralize past kammic influences by recognizing them and taking the steps necessary to delete these influences, these seeds, from our karmic imprint. This is anything but being a prisoner of our kamma. A prisoner does not have access to the keys of their own liberation from prison, you do. That's the difference.

This means that kamma; our karmic past; our karmic imprint, is not expressly set in stone. While much of our world and personal experiences are objective, what of the subjective side of life? True, our objective circumstances, such as not having enough food, clean water, or money to pay our basic living expenses, we often times ignore the subjective effects of these things; meaning our perceptions, how and why we think the things we do.

How can we develop our awareness and cognition of our intentions when situations arise passively, which we get instantly and independently of choice? These passive situations arise because of our attitude; our learned perception; our past experiences and habitual reactions, do not mean that we are tethered or bound to them to automatically react.

These sorts of passive situations arise because we do not realize that they are linked to our past kamma; our karmic imprint. Most times, we react without thinking. However, once we have developed a sense of mindful awareness through meditation, we are able to grab hold of the infinite space of the present moment; stepping back; pausing, just for a moment to take an inventory of the intentions behind our actions. In this way we are able to see and comprehend that link between our intentions and our actions and change the direction of our actions; away from an action that may feed the seeds of our kamma.

Often times we do not see or comprehend the type of intention our actions are dominated by. We react so quickly that we do not see or comprehend our intention of selfishness, ambition, dullness, hatred, and so on. Without this insight, regardless of our circumstances in life, rich, healthy, beautiful, and so no, we are still provoking and fueling suffering for ourselves and others. We will continue to not only fuel our own suffering, but we will be feeding the kamma (actions) that causes the suffering.

However, despite how hopeless we may feel our circumstances are in life, through meditation and mindful awareness we can begin to develop different patterns that alter the course of our kamma. Regardless of the circumstances of the external world we may live with, we can begin to develop an inner

world of peace, tranquility, and equanimity. It is up to you. No one else is in control of your conscious awareness, your intentions and your actions, but you.

The Goal of the Buddha's Teachings

So, you have begun to learn a few things about the Buddha's teachings. Maybe you have learned that meditation is one method of finding a calm space in your day. The actual goal of the Buddha's teachings cannot be found in picking only the parts that you might enjoy. Meditation can bring calmness to the body, but meditation is a very small element of the overall teachings. Once individuals begin the journey of awakening through meditation practice, they start to learn that the scope of the Buddha's teachings is vast and encompasses every aspect of the situations of living.

Eventually, when one remains on the path, advancing little by little through mindful awareness, you begin to understand the real aim of the Buddha's teachings. Mere meditation practice is not intended to simply help you achieve good results by performing good kamma. Improving our knowledge and practicing the Eightfold Noble Path will set into motion good kamma.

While this will change the condition of your rebirth, as long as we remain subject to kamma we are subject to the cycle of samsara (death and rebirth). Meditation alone is what is considered to be a mundane goal. In and of itself, meditation allows for us to establish a connection to ourselves; to see ourselves as we really are, and to open our understanding to the truth about the nature of reality. So, the true aim of the Buddha's teachings; the final goal, is to free oneself from the cycle of birth and death.

This freeing oneself is what nibbana (nirvana) does. Nibbana (nirvana) literally means "to blowing out." Once we have reached the final goal, we blow out the cycle of birth and death known as samsara. This is the true liberation. The final liberation.

How Nibbana is Achieved

Everyday kamma, ordinary kamma, is an action that is habituated by clinging. What this means is that if we cling to good intentions, we will respond in kind by performing good or wholesome actions. Obviously, if we cling to bad intentions or what might be called intentions rooted in selfishness, greed, anger, envy, and so on, we will produce results along those lines; unwholesome. These are things that inevitably either harm ourselves or someone else in some way. Either way the intentions that lead to results or actions, is clinging, and as the Buddha taught, clinging finds its roots in ignorance.

Whether good or bad, the point is to see that both contain elements of clinging. To cling to something, good or bad, is not the middle path that the Buddha taught.

Actions performed because of clinging to the idea of doing good is still the same clinging to performing bad actions. Why this is, is because we do not understand the full meaning of the Middle Path that the Buddha taught. The Middle Path or Middle Way, is living in a state of equanimity, meaning living and practicing in a state of calm composure with a mental level-headedness.

Equanimity allows us to have the perspective to know that in life, stuff happens, and everything is impermanent, so there is no reason or necessity to get our knickers in a twist. Equanimity does not mean that we become detached or utterly passive.

Equanimity teaches us that when problems

exist, which of course they will, we don't fall apart at the seams, rather we view these events with compassion and understanding.

If we don't understand why something has happened immediately, then this is not license to fall apart or become overly emotional. We realize that, although a problem exists, that it is impermanent. whatever it is. Yes, we can experience sadness or pain, but it does not mean that the sadness and pain will last forever, but more than this, equanimity means that you can handle whatever it is you are experiencing.

Equanimity means that we realize that something we experience might be hard, but not horrific. Stopping yourself from experiencing your emotions is not the goal of equanimity. Rather, the goal is to develop a sense of space around our problems and suffering; more-so to develop a balance.

In fact, equanimity itself is an emotion, just not generally an emotion that most people develop. However, it could be stated that equanimity is probably the most sublime, beautiful and uplifting emotion one could develop in relation to one's practice.

In his description of equanimity, the Buddha described equanimity as a person whose thinking and behavior is abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill-will. Developing equanimity does not mean that a person reacts or lives in a cloud of dry neutrality or cool aloofness. Equanimity that is mature produces a radiance and warmth of being that radiates to others, and is infectious.

People want to be around those who exhibit equanimity.

But, equanimity does not mean to ignore the things that happen to you and around you. Rather, it means that you see, but overlook the things that normally cause negative reactions. In fact, the English word 'equanimity' translates to the Pali words *upekkha*⁵⁰ and *tatramajjhata*. *Upekkha* literally means "to look over," meaning to see a thing, but to overlook certain aspects. Again, not ignoring, but seeing, comprehending, considering, but taking a middle-of-the-road position.

The other word translated into 'equanimity' is *tatramajjhata*⁵¹ (*tah-tra-mahj-jha-tah-tah*), which means "to stand in the middle of all of this." So, having equanimity means that you see and acknowledge what you are involved in (standing in the middle), but neither reacting or not reacting to, the situation. Another way of saying this would be, "It is what it is. It just is," but not in a detached way, rather being in the middle, taking the middle stance of balance, to remain centered in the middle of our perceptions, opinions or beliefs, regardless of what is happening.

The balance of equanimity develops from inner calmness, a sense of well-being, inner strength, confidence and integrity. As understanding and strength grow thorough practice and meditation, inner strength amplifies, and keeps us upright and steady when strong circumstances and situations arise.

⁵⁰ *Upekkha* Pali *ibid* उपेक्षा ; *upekkhā* ; neutrality ; equanimity ; indifference; उपेक्षा ; Indifference to pain and pleasure , equanimity , resignation , stoicism. hedonic neutrality or indifference, zero point between joy & sorrow; disinterestedness, neutral feeling, equanimity: https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=upekkh%C4%81%20&%20upekkh%C4%81&searchhws=yes

⁵¹ *Tatramajjhata* Pali *tatra*: तत्र ; *tatra* ; There ; thither ; in that case , now , here ; in that , therein ज्ञातता ; *majjhata* ; Impartiality , moderation , indifference; (complete) equanimity (keeping balance here & there): https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=tatramajjhata&matchtype=default

Developing equanimity results in a kind of protection from overly praising, blaming, opinions of success and failure, seeking fame, clinging to pleasures or overly avoiding pain, and becoming excessively elated with success.

All of these things can set ourselves up for suffering. We have all observed people who have gained great wealth or fame who have become arrogant, sometimes becoming personally invested in their own fame or wealth, with the consequences of becoming conceited.

Conversely, we can become overwhelmed with defeat or failure, we become discouraged, making it difficult to feel and sense of inner well-being. Equanimity causes us to stay of course; remaining on an even keel, as it were, regardless of the events taking place around us.

Kamma of the Eightfold Path

In the beginning of practice, it is not unusual, bad or wrong, to cling to your newly developed habits of meditation or study. This situation eventually decreases once one begins and sticks with practicing the Eightfold Path because practicing the Eightfold Path develops mindfulness and insight.

Developing mindfulness and insight means that we begin to see things as they really are, meaning you begin to see the emptiness of phenomena; you begin to realize the impermanence of things, as well as the conditioning that is at the root of all things.

An individual that has successfully put an end to all clinging breaks free from the chains of kamma. This is the beginning of liberation from all things that cause suffering. However, while this does not mean that suffering disappears. As long as we are alive and have a body, we are subject to aging and sickness.

However, we no longer cling to the desires such as wishing we were healthier or younger. Equanimity is achieved.

Before one can effectively practice the Eightfold Path, understanding of the Four Noble Truths is a prerequisite. One must be clear about their understanding that:

Knowledge of real suffering.

Being able to recognize one's own suffering. It is through the attachment to the senses (sensuality), and the troubles that ensue from these attachments that cause great suffering. Physical body senses, such as eyes, ears, noses, tongues, body (touch), and brain are the six internal sense-spheres that operate in both enlightened and unenlightened people. In the enlightened person these operate with little influence to cause suffering. However, in the unenlightened person, these senses create attachments from wrong thinking, such as greed, aversion, delusion, which cause wrong actions producing negative kamma whenever the senses are stimulated by external objects.

Therefore, it is those who know nothing better to do than to react to their senses according to their desires, which are influenced by their past kamma, whenever conditions are ripe. This is the cause of one's own oppression.

People who have no knowledge of these things; who are ignorant of the Buddha's teachings, are at the mercy of their own oppressive past kamma. Everything is impermanent and is subject to destruction. Human beings fear for the destruction of themselves, and their sense faculties, generating great fear and suffering.

This instability is a cause for suffering for those who are unenlightened and ignorant about the truth of the nature of reality. This

instability is known as vipariṇāma⁵². What we think or wish to be permanent is subject to destruction, and we are made aware of this instability whenever we lose something either from death, or destruction of an object or destruction of something depended upon, such as the economy or one's employment. The mere thought of a depressed economy causes us to worry.

Suffering is also experienced by not only our own actions of greed, aversion and delusion, but by others actions as well. These are like fires that burn humankind with endless suffering that are constantly being refueled through the senses.

Knowledge of the true cause of suffering.

As long as one is attached to the senses as “mine” and “myself,” the cycle of birth and death continues. It is craving, desire, and greed, which are connected to the senses, that is the true cause for the arising of suffering. Therefore, it is only having a right-view knowledge that provides understanding of the cause of suffering.

Knowledge of the cessation of suffering.

Gaining knowledge of the source of suffering, especially the causes of one's own suffering, brings some relief. Each moment in the present when one is able to curb one's cravings and greed, relief is realized. However, successfully ending one's craving and greed means that these things will not arise again after death. This is the right-view knowledge that provides understanding of the cessation of suffering.

Knowledge of that right path leading to the cessation of suffering.

Developing one's right-thinking through meditation means that the true nature of one's own senses is understood. Craving to satisfy the senses can end in this life, right now, the present.

It is only through practicing the Dhamma that leads to obtaining a right-view of things. Right-view is the most essential, and it is the right-view of the Four Noble Truths that is the key.

For one who has achieved perfect equanimity, breaking free from all clinging and desire, becomes, what is called in the Pali texts, an Arahant⁵³.

Now, a person that achieves Arahantship, no longer generates any kamma. While they continue to live and act, performing volitional actions, their actions no longer produce a karmic imprint. In other words, their actions do not lead to the production of any karmic seed; leaving no imprint on the stream of consciousness, which means that there is nothing to mature in the future.

All of the activity (actions) of an Arahant is no longer known as kamma. Rather, an Arahant's actions are called kriyas. Kriya means “simple action.” All of the acts they perform, while are still deeds generated from their own will (intention), they leave no trace of kamma on their stream of consciousness. They have broken free from bondage to kamma. They reach the final release known as Nibbana.

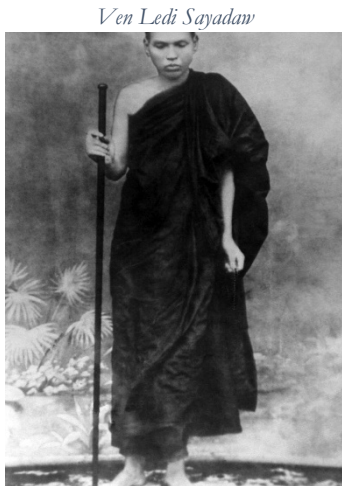
⁵² vipariṇāma *Pali* विपरिणाम ; vipariṇāma ; change; change (for the worse), reverse, vicissitude:

https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=vipari%E1%B9%87%C4%81ma&searchhws=yes

⁵³ Arahant *Pali* अरहत्त ; arahatta ; state of an arahant ; final emancipation ; the highest stage of the Path; "destroyed is (re-) birth, lived is a chaste life, (of a student) done is what had to be done, after this present life there is no beyond: https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/pali_query.py?qs=arahant&searchhws=yes

Coming Around Again - Conclusion

“If a monk or teacher is asked, “What did the Buddha teach?” he would rightly reply, “The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.” If he is then questioned further as to what they consisted of, he should be able to define them accurately, without uncertainty, ambiguity, or recourse to his own ideas.



This is very important—that the supremely clear words of the Buddha are not distorted, either through ignorance or because of one’s own speculations. The Buddha has often praised

deep learning, just as he has pointed out the dangers in holding opinions and views which are the result only of one’s personal feelings and preferences, or of misinterpreted experience. There is little to excuse such things since the Buddha himself has carefully defined what is meant by the truth of dukkha (suffering), or what constitutes right view, just to name two examples.

The Buddha’s definitions are un-confusing and convincing since they arise from his Unsurpassed Perfect Awakening. But one’s own ideas, or the speculations of those who depart from his words, cannot be so without some bias towards what is more comforting to believe, what, in other words, one’s undisciplined emotions draw one to believe.

Such “tangles of views” are endless in this world and produce much conflict as well. No good comes of holding wrong views. Those who do so usually do not like to practice the Dhamma; they prefer to think about it and talk about it. But one does not become a Buddhist by mere thinking and talking, only by practice, and this Noble Eightfold Path, containing within it the Four Noble Truths, is the preeminent path of practice—of wisdom, moral conduct, and meditation.” – Ven. Ledi Sayadaw⁵⁴

“All beings are the owners of their kamma, heirs to their kamma, born of their kamma, related to their kamma, abide supported by their kamma; whatever kamma they shall do, whether good or evil, of that they will be the heirs.” – Buddha

Over the last several decades, since the teachings of the Buddha have come to Western countries, a lot of debate has developed as to whether or not the teachings and practices taught by the Buddha, constitute a religion.

The one element of the teachings of the Buddha that separate them from the overall worldview of religion is kamma.

Kamma is not meted out by the saints or gods of the World’s religions. These have no power to give or take away anything. However, present kamma can. Whatever the present condition of our kamma, it exists because of our own actions. Our lives, therefore, are not the results of the judgments of some otherworldly beings. While it might be comforting to believe that we can do something to appease saints and gods, we can actually only change our circumstances and

⁵⁴ Ven. Ledi Sayadaw: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ledi_Sayadaw

influence our rebirth through our own actions; our own kamma.

It stands to reason that if saints and gods had the power to give people whatever is asked, then it wouldn't be necessary for the followers of such beings to have to work. It is said that the gods of the World's religions provide everything for their followers. Conversely, those who do not believe in or follow such saints and gods, would not receive anything even though they have worked. Whether one is rich or poor, whether they believe in or follow the saints and gods of the World's religions, they would still make kamma; they would still be rich or poor.

Why is it that we do not see only wealthy persons who believe in and worship gods and saints? Why do we also see poor persons who also worship the saints and gods of the World's religions? The answer is because the only element in operation is kamma. Wealth in this life is only a result of present kamma, not a gift from saints or gods. The same is true for any characteristic feature of life; for education, knowledge, which is obtained through study and learning.

Neither are those who believe in and worship saints and gods free from wrong or evil acts, and sickness. Such believers are not cured by taking refuge in saints or gods. The same as everyone else, they must treat their sicknesses medically. Cures can only be obtained when the right conditions are present.

Sincere worship or belief in saints and gods does not protect one from reaping the results of their actions. So-called sins (bad or evil actions) are not simply washed away by belief or worship. If this were true then the world would be filled with saintly god-worshipping beings. The only refuge that is available to people is through good actions; good kamma.

The kind of life, situations and circumstances, that we are experiencing in the present are the result of our present kamma, which is past kamma that has become activated now. The kind of life, circumstances and situations that we will experience in the next rebirth is up to you, right now, in the present. This is why is so important to open our minds and hearts to the correct teachings of the Buddha; to have right-views, correct knowledge and understanding of both kamma and rebirth, for your future depends upon it.

"How complex, indeed, are situations in human life, even when they appear deceptively simple! This is so because the situations and their outcome mirror the still greater complexity of the mind, their inexhaustible source.

The Buddha himself has said: "The mind's complexity surpasses even the countless varieties of the animal kingdom." (SN 22.100) For any single individual, the mind is a stream of ever-changing mental processes driven by the currents and cross-currents of kamma accumulated in countless past existences. But this complexity, already great, is increased still very much more by the fact that each individual life-stream is interwoven with many other individual life-streams through the interaction of their respective kammās.

So intricate is the net of kammic conditioning that the Buddha declared kamma-result to be one of the four "unthinkables" (acinteyya) and warned against creating it as a subject of speculation. But though the detailed workings of kamma escape our intellection, the practically important message is clear: the fact that kammic results are modifiable, frees us from the bane of determinism and its ethical corollary, fatalism, and keeps the road to liberation constantly open before us." - Nyanaponika Thera